A booth attendant demonstrating Fujitsu's Human Motion Analytics data analysis platform and the AI agent at the Combined Exhibition of Advanced Technologies in Chiba, Japan, on Oct 14. Skills – whether in medicine or craftsmanship like music or sports – are not just about efficiency, says the writer. They connect us to meaning, excellence and community. BLOOMBERG

AI-fasting – Just what the doctor ordered

We can lose our skills if we rely too much on AI. We need to take some breaks from it.

Jennifer Ang

The recent move by the National University Health System (NUHS) and National Healthcare Group (NHG) to introduce "AI-free periods" for doctors may sound surprising. After all, isn't artificial intelligence (AI) meant to help us work faster and better? But the concern here is real: When we rely too heavily on machines, we risk losing the very skills that make us competent and confident professionals.

A study published in the Lancet Gastroenterology and Hepatology journal in August 2025 found that experienced doctors who had used AI assistance tools to detect pre-cancerous growths in the colon were less adept at doing so without them in a period of three months. This challenges the belief that while AI tools erode the abilities of novices, they do not affect those already skilled.

THE EVERYDAY RISKS OF OVER-RELIANCE

This isn't a problem for just doctors. We see similar patterns in our daily lives. How many of us can still find our way without relying on the Global Positioning System (GPS)? How often do we rely on predictive text or writing tools instead of shaping our own sentences and ideas?

Even social media and chatbots are subtly reshaping how we connect with others, sometimes at the expense of genuine relationships. Over time, such habits can also chip away at deeper skills like writing and critical thinking, as we grow accustomed to bite-size information and automated assistance.

Deskilling, in short, is happening all around us. Technology makes things easier, but ease can come at the cost of practice, patience and even depth of thought.

Other industries have long recognised this risk. Commercial planes can technically fly themselves from take-off to landing, yet pilots still train rigorously and are required to fly parts of the journey manually – because in an emergency, only a skilled human can take control with confidence.

The same principle should also apply to the use of AI in healthcare, education, workplaces and beyond. If we outsource too much, we risk losing not just practical skills ("knowing how") but also deeper abilities like critical thinking, judgment and even moral reasoning.

A new study from MIT's Media Lab found that ChatGPT users have diminished brain engagement and activity, with potential impact on cognitive development, critical thinking and intellectual independence. This suggests that "AI-fasting" may be necessary to prevent cognitive deskilling – especially among students, where overuse could stunt intellectual growth.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The challenge, then, is not to reject AI, but to build guardrails for how we use it. One approach is to consciously carve out "AI-free time" – whether in classrooms, workplaces or daily routines. This ensures we continue to sharpen our judgment, practise our skills and nurture independence rather than leaning on machines for every answer.

At the same time, workplaces can treat automation not as a replacement but as a partner. That means redesigning jobs so that humans keep control over critical tasks while machines handle the repetitive ones, and investing in reskilling so workers gain new competencies instead of losing old ones.

Finally, we must resist automation bias – the tendency to assume AI is always right.

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Whether in medical diagnoses, workplace decisions or everyday choices, users need to exercise vigilance, remain willing to override AI recommendations and take responsibility for the decisions they make.

This matters because skills – whether in medicine, teaching or forms of craftsmanship like in the culinary arts, music or sports – are not just about efficiency. They connect us to meaning, excellence and community.

Beyond efficiency, automation can also threaten the spirit of certain craftsmanship. Philosopher Albert Borgmann warns that when tools make tasks too convenient, we lose the rituals and effort that give practices their depth and meaning. A fine violin performance, for instance, is not just about producing sound but about years of training, patience and tradition. These are the kinds of human connections and excellence that no device, or AI, can replace or replicate.

The same goes for moral decision-making. We can use tools to nudge us towards safer or more efficient behaviour, but genuine ethical choices often require weighing values, emotions and consequences. Over time, if we let machines decide for us, we risk losing our moral compass.

As ethicist Shannon Vallor warns, when AI systems handle moral decisions, people may lose the very skills needed to make them – because practice and experience are what build sound judgment. Simple nudges, like speed cameras or energy-saving devices, may help with routine choices, but true ethical dilemmas demand reasoning that no algorithm can replace.

Human excellence, as Aristotle reminds us, is built through habit, practice and balance. AI can be a powerful partner, but it must not take away the very opportunities that allow us to grow in skill, intellect and virtue.

• Jennifer Ang is Associate Professor at the Singapore University of Social Sciences and lead principal investigator for "Ethics of Autonomy and Care in AI Decision-making" with the DesCartes programme supported by National Research Foundation.